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ABSTRACT

The Latin American experience in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) differs from the United States experience in a number of ways. In Latin America, the native language is Spanish or Portuguese, and student background is much more homogeneous. TESOL began earlier in Latin America and the need there is greater. Effective TESOL instruction in Latin America often lies outside the realm of the governmental educational system, and much of it is accomplished through binational centers which receive support from the United States government. Teacher preparation is not as sophisticated, and teaching procedures are often based on pragmatism rather than linguistic theory. The Teachers of English to Speakers of Othe Languages should organize a department for teaching English to speakers of Spanish (TESS) and should design programs for that particular area. The organization should broaden its scope and not limit itself to problems of American teachers or to students in the United States. (VM)

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CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LATIN AMERICAN TESOL EXPERIENCE

Robert B. Young

I. THE MEXICO CITY OPERATION

For more than nineteen years I have lived and worked in Latin America, during most of this period in connection with the teaching of English to speakers of Spanish. Certain basic differences between TESOL in the United States and TESOL in Latin America have become apparent, and I sincerely believe that each could benefit from the experience of the other.

At the present time I am Director of the Binational Center in Mexico City, a non-profit, non-governmental and non-sectarian organization dedicated to a better understanding between the peoples of the United States and Mexico, through a program of cultural interchange, and the teaching of the two languages to an average enrollment of more than seven thousand students. Its somewhat cumbersome local name is "The Mexican-North American Institute of Cultural Relations", and juridically it is a Mexican non-profit corporation.

My Latin American TESOL experience is not limited to this Institute however. It includes, in addition to the teaching of English in other private schools, the management of a Binational Center in a smaller city in Mexico, and visits to most of the Binational Centers in the capital cities of Latin America, And, in 1965 and 1966, while serving as Cultural Attaché in the U. S. Embassy in Montevideo, Uruguay, I worked with the local Binational Center as a member of its Board of Directors.

The first serious study by a competent individual of the TESOL activities of these Binational Centers will be published soon. It was made by Dr. Donald M. Decker, Chairman of the English as a Second Language Department of Elbert Covell College of

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the University of the Pacific. A portion of this study will be published in March or April of this year by the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington. It is to be entitled "The English as a Second Language Programs of the American and British Binational Institutes in Mexico", and it will deal with the fourteen U. S. and the three British Binational Centers in that country. The publication of this article will be announced in "Research in Education", a monthly periodical of the U. S. Office of Education.

The Binational Center in Mexico City has been actively engaged in the teaching of English as a foreign language for more than twenty-seven years. During this period, we have taught English to more than 175,000 Mexican adults. We have on our staff sixty full-time teachers of English. At any given time, more than seven thousand students are registered with us and attending daily classes to learn English. With a few minor exceptions in specific, short-term, advanced courses, all materials used in our classes were developed over the years by the staff of the organization. For instance, our teachers wrote, tested, printed and taught with two complete series of textbooks, and eventually discarded both to bring into existence the current "American English Series", employed effectively in most of the Binational Centers in Spanish-speaking Latin America. We have had constant opportunities to establish and operate special research and materials-development projects, and to test the new materials on our seven thousand students. Typical of these projects are experiments in better testing, and in the development of special courses, both at the beginning and advanced levels. For example, we once devised a complete pre-reading course, and printed a student and teacher textbook for it. We wrote, tested, and employed a language-laboratory course in three levels, with three printed textbooks. While both of these

courses have since been discontinued, the experience we gained in the process has been invaluable. And this process has been duplicated in city after city of Latin America.

II. TESS AND TESP

A first and obvious aspect of TESOL in Latin America is that it should be abbreviated TESS -- "Teachers of English to Speakers of Spanish" -- and perhaps TESP in Brazil. Of course, there are many programs in the United States, with classes made up exclusively of Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, American Indians, etc. But I am sure that many others of you have struggled under the handicap of an English class composed of students with varying language backgrounds. And I am also sure that you can appreciate the advantages to the teacher and to the materials developer of a single and well-defined language experience on the part of all the students in a class.

Our sixty English teachers, all native speakers of that language, are at the same time all fluent in Spanish, the language of their students. They and our staff members working in materials development are keenly aware of the specific problems of transference and interference from Spanish to English in pronunciation and other sound areas, in lexicon (with cognates, both true and false), and in syntax, in this instance perhaps the area of greatest diversion and greatest problems. Thus, our materials, our techniques and methodology are designed to correct the interference and to take maximum advantage of transference from Spanish to English.

III. EARLIER START

Another aspect of TESOL in Latin America is that it started earlier there than in the United States. In Argentina, for example, English instruction was well established

in the 1870's by the many American teachers imported by Argentina's second President, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. This interest was stimulated by the thousands of English scientists and engineers who invaded the country in connection with the construction and operation of the railroads and power plants. In 1929 the American Binational Center in Buenos Aires, the ICANA, was founded, and it has functioned aggressively and effectively ever since in the TESOL field--more than forty years of uninterrupted TESOL experience, teaching English to hundreds of thousands of Argentinians. And this story is typical of the hundreds of Binational Centers located throughout Latin America.

IV. GREATER NEED

The interest in and need for TESOL instruction applies to a much greater portion of the population of Latin America than of the United States. So great is the demand for English instruction there that countless students fall prey to the lure of fly-by-night diploma mills charging exorbitant fees to "teach English" in 80 contact hours... or less! For the university student, particularly in the sciences and professions, a reading knowledge of English is essential, because many of his textbooks are available only in that language. For the manufacturer or business man, a knowledge of English, the international language of business, is required, as it is for his department heads and their secretaries. For the millions engaged in tourist-related services, from the humble street seller of handicrafts to the entire staffs of hotels, restaurants and travel agencies, English is the tool of their trade. For these and other reasons, a surprisingly large percentage of the two-hundred-and-fifty million inhabitants of Latin America demand English instruction. These are students with an incredibly high motivation, a deep and sincere desire to learn English, and to learn along with it something of the culture of the native speakers of this language.

You, of course, receive a few of these students in U. S. universities. But the great majority of them find it impossible for economic reasons to travel to the States to study English, and as a result an extensive TESOL service has grown up in Latin America through the years. It varies tremendously in effectiveness. Where English is offered in the public school system, it tends to be ineffective. Typical of English instruction at the secondary level in Latin America is the class of 60 or more students in a single room, receiving two 45 minute periods per week of English instruction from a teacher who all too often does not speak, understand, nor even read the language. Certain universities, technical schools, and normal schools do better, but they reach only a very small percentage of those interested in the study of English. Private schools at the primary and secondary level are also more effective, and fill a part of the urgent need for English instruction. However, they tend to be expensive, and thus their effect is limited to the higher economic levels of the population. The organizations best meeting the needs of the remainder of the inhabitants of Latin America are the Binational Centers, such as the one in Mexico City. One-hundred and ten of these centers in Latin America now receive financial assistance from the Government of the United States, through the U. S. Information Agency and the local Embassy. Another 150 or so in the smaller towns receive the guidance and cooperation of the U. S. Government, without direct financial help. This network of more than 260 centers brings effective English instruction within the reach of most of the population of Latin America, and at a price that they can afford to pay. Our students in Mexico City, for example, pay less than ten dollars a month for daily classes of fifty minutes, and an extensive program of scholarship help is available for those who cannot meet this modest charge. The cost varies upward in the more

expensive capital cities, and downward in the smaller towns, but our charges are more or less typical of the cost of English instruction in the Binational Centers throughout Latin America.

To summarize this point, effective TESOL instruction in Latin America lies outside the realm and authority of the official governmental educational system, and for the most part below the university level. It is a business or a non-profit service, on the level of non-accredited adult education.

V. LOWER LEVEL

Another characteristic of Latin America is that education in general and teacher-training in particular are much less sophisticated than in the United States. William Winnie of Colorado State University, in his book "Latin American Development", states: "Many Latin American teachers are inadequately prepared: in seven countries for which recent data are available, one-half or more of the primary school teachers had neither certification nor any systematic teacher-training."[1] He cites figures indicating the completion of less than four years of schooling for the average adult of Latin America today, and describes a drop-out rate of as high as thirty-five percent <u>each</u> in the first and second grades in some countries. Last fall the Ministry of Public Education of Mexico published a two-volume review of accomplishments during the six-year period from 1964 to 1970.[2] Among the figures cited with justifiable pride are the following: while in 1964 only 5.7 percent of the students entering the first grade completed the sixth grade, that figure had risen in 1970 to 9.8 percent. Even after almost doubling the percentage in the last six years, less than one in ten of the students beginning grammar school completes the sixth grade!

In view of these facts, it is obvious that teacher training and education in general (including TESOL instruction) must be planned and conducted on a much less sophisticated level than in the United States. We offer a series of three, thirty-six hour courses for the training of Mexican teachers of English. Admission is limited to those students who have demonstrated a satisfactory command of English by passing a standard U. S.-developed proficiency examination designed for college entrance, and native speakers often take these classes along with Mexican students. While we are able to use Clifford Prator's book[3] for the course on the sound system of English, we found nothing in print that was simple enough for the course that analyzes the English language, and the course that presents techniques and methodology. We were forced to create our own textbooks for these courses. Admittedly, we do not turn out Mexican teachers who have attained a mastery of English or who are experts in TESOL. However, Mexicans teach English in the public school system of their country, and will continue to do so, whether properly prepared or not. Those who complete successfully our three teacher-training courses, unsophisticated as they are, will still teach English many times more effectively than do those who have not had this experience.

Among the sixty English teachers on the staff of the Mexico City Binational Center are some with Masters degrees in TESOL. There are others with nothing more than a high school diploma and a natural teaching ability backed up by a deep interest in their students. And I consider this staff as a whole to be among the most dedicated and effective groups of teachers in the TESOL field in the Western Hemisphere today. We attempt to keep up to date through a week each year of full-time in-service training, plus a series of outstanding lecturers that have included Grant Taylor, Audrey Wright, Robert Lado, and others. Mario Pei will go to Mexico City to lecture

for us this June.

Primarily, however, our teachers have learned by doing, and in this process they have mastered the techniques and methodology of teaching English to speakers of Spanish. "Pragmatism" might identify best our approach to TESOL. And, while no accrediting association would consider approving our classes, we are teaching English effectively--we are producing bilingual Mexicans by the tens of thousands.

Thus, the TESOL structure in Latin America developed pragmatically, over a long period of time. And it developed completely free of the control or influence of school boards, state and local departments of education, accrediting organizations, standardized admission policies, etc. It adopted techniques that work, with relatively little preparation in formal linguistics and TESOL theory. And, because the field is competitive, the organizations that became effective survived, the others disappeared. TESOL teachers, without the protection of formal tenure, developed the ability to teach effectively, or they lost out and turned to other activities. For those working in materials development, either the textbooks they produced enabled the teacher to teach more effectively, or the textbooks didn't sell and publication was discontinued. The net result is amazingly effective TESOL instruction.

VI. TESS WITHIN TESOL

Nothing I have said should be construed to mean that TESOL in Latin America has no need for the type of linguistic investigation and sophisticated TESOL training available in the United States. On the contrary, it could benefit enormously from these innovations.

I would suggest that our organization consider establishing a department to be labeled "TESS" - the "Teaching of English to Speakers of Spanish". Among potential

students of English as a foreign language in this part of the world--the Western Hemisphere--speakers of Spanish are far more numerous than the speakers of all other languages put together. Even within the United States, the Spanish speakers from Puerto Rico and Cuba in the East, and from Mexico in the West, must outnumber the speakers of all other non-English languages. Let's acknowledge this fact within our organization by a major concentration on the teaching of English to speakers of Spanish. Such a concentration would make the activities of TESOL, and these annual conventions much more meaningful to the tens of thousands of English teachers in Latin America.

Such a concentration would also provide a channel through which the TESOL experiences of Latin America could be made available to teachers in the United States. I would like to see a year in which perhaps one-half of all scheduled topics at an annual convention of TESOL were related to the teaching of English to speakers of Spanish, and where at least one-half of the speakers on these topics were invited from Latin America. This would encourage and formalize the interchange of experiences between the United States and Latin America in this vital field, the teaching of English to speakers of Spanish.

I would like to see the time come when half of these annual conventions are held outside of the United States, with a majority of the foreign conventions in Latin America where the demand for TESOL instruction is much more widespread than in the States. This would make it possible for many more of the Latin American teachers of English to attend these conventions, and to benefit from the discussions held here. The lower salaries in Latin America, coupled with unfavorable exchange rates, now make it impossible for many of these teachers to be with us.

The convention in Puerto Rico in 1973 is, of course, a beginning. To continue this trend, we have suggested that TESOL consider the possibility of Mexico City for the convention in 1975 or 1976. There is nothing in the title of our organization to indicate that it is made up of American Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, or of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages in the United States. The title implies that it has an international interest. Let us hope that it develops in this direction.

[1]Winnie, William W., Jr. Latin American Development: Theoretical, Sectoral, and Operational Approaches (Latin American Studies, Volume 8), U.C.L.A., Los Angeles, 1967, pp. 78-92.

[2]Secretaría de Educación Pública, La Educación Pública en Mexico, 1964-1970, La Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico City, 1970, Vol. II, pp. 294-295.

[3]Prator, Clifford H., Jr., Manuel of American English Pronunciation, Revised, Rinehart & Company, Inc., New York, 1957.